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SUBJECT: THESSALONIKI: GOG DISCOURAGES TEACHERS FROM INVOLVING SCHOOLCHILDREN IN MACEDONIAN NAME ISSUE

REF: THESSALONIKI 14

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Teachers from two elementary schools in Thessaloniki have generated controversy by announcing their students will travel to the village of Evzoni on the Republic of Macedonia border to participate in Greek Independence Day celebrations on March 25. The celebrations will include a march and a speech by a well-known nationalist academic and activist on the Macedonian name issue. Teachers claim their initiative has nothing to do with the name issue, but local observers have criticized their ill-timed political meddling and exploitation of children. While the MFA has privately downplayed the significance of the event (e.g. regarding relations with Macedonia), the Minister of Education publicly urged the organizers to avoid "any moves related to the name issue." A senior Ministry of Education official told post the schools have not obtained authorization for the trip to the border, casting doubt on whether it will take place. END SUMMARY

CHILDREN TO MARCH FOR THE PRESERVATION OF GREEK MACEDONIA

¶2. (SBU) Teachers at two Thessaloniki elementary schools have announced that their pupils will travel to the village of Evzoni, on Greece's border with the Republic of Macedonia, in order to participate in activities marking the 187th anniversary of Greece's independence from Turkey. The activities will include a march, a mass, a wreath laying, a visit to the Evzoni customs station and a speech by well known nationalist academic and journalist Costas Zouraris, who led a rally in Thessaloniki on the name issue earlier this month (March 05) (reftel). Evzoni played no special role in the war of independence, and this will be the first time students from these schools have traveled to Evzoni on national day. It is unclear how many students will participate. Only 35 have so far turned in required parental consent forms.

GOVERNMENT, MEDIA OPPOSE TEACHERS' MEDDLING IN NAME ISSUE

¶3. (SBU) Teachers claim their initiative is unrelated to the name issue but few believe them. Teachers associations and media have criticized the "despicable political exploitation of children" and the possible undermining of negotiations on the name. Commenting on the announced school trip, Minister of Education Stylianides cautioned organizers against making "any moves related to the name issue." Another senior Ministry of Education official told post March 20 the teachers and students are required by law to obtain authorization for such a trip from the Ministry, and that so far no such authorization had been requested. Evzoni Mayor Dimitris Smidakis on the other hand, maintained that "no permit is necessary for joining a parade on a national day." MFA contacts have also downplayed the political significance of the trip.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: While it is not unusual for Thessaloniki students to visit provincial towns on Independence Day, the

choice of a town on the Macedonian border is not a coincidence, and likely intended to exert pressure on the government. The GoG is openly discouraging the trip and hoping it will not happen. The lack of public support for the initiative and the low turnout for recent "Macedonia is Greek" rallies (reftel) reflect general acceptance of the GoG negotiating position and widespread pre-occupation with other issues, such as mass strikes over pension reform. END COMMENT

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